

Recovering from the Emotional Aftermath of a Disaster

Disasters are traumatic events for everyone involved, not just victims. If you are a first responder, relief worker or volunteer, learn how to prepare yourself for the emotional aftermath of disasters before they strike.

Start by becoming familiar with some common reactions to traumatic events:

Emotional Changes

- Shock
- Numbness
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Depression
- Feeling lost or abandoned
- Fear of harm to self or loved-ones
- Volatility
- Feeling nothing at all or uncertain about what you are feeling
- Changes in Thinking
- Trouble concentrating
- Confusion
- Disorientation
- Indecisiveness
- Short attention span
- Memory loss
- Unwanted memories
- Difficulty making decisions

Physical Changes

- Nausea
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Rapid heart rate
- Tremors
- Headaches
- Grinding of teeth
- Fatigue or trouble sleeping
- Jumpiness

Behavioral Changes

- Irritability
- Argumentativeness
- Suspicion
- Withdrawal and silence
- Inappropriate humor
- Increased or decreased appetite
- Loss of interest in normal activities
- Increased smoking
- Alcohol or drug abuse

It's normal to experience strong reactions to disasters. Some reactions, however, are cause for greater concern. If you, or a colleague, begin to experience any of the following, it's time to take a break and get help from a professional counselor.

- Severe anxiety
- Extreme disorientation
- Significant memory loss
- Pervasive feelings of hopelessness or despair
- Psychosis (hearing voices, seeing visions or experiencing delusional thinking)
- Suicidal or homicidal thoughts
- Becoming violent towards family members
- Extreme abuse of alcohol or drugs

You don't have to wait for your stress levels to become unmanageable. There are some practical steps you can take to help alleviate the pressures of disaster work:

- Pace yourself and limit your work time to 12 hours per day.
- Whenever possible, take rotations from high-stress to lower-stress functions.
- Take breaks, even for short periods.
- Exercise periodically.
- Eat healthy meals and snacks, and drink plenty of water.
- Talk about your emotions and experiences.
- Pair up with a co-worker and agree to monitor each other.
- If counseling services are offered, take advantage of them.
- Recognize and accept the things you cannot control, such as the chain of command, equipment failures and bad weather.
- Participate in memorials and rituals.
- Stay in touch with your family and friends.

Once a disaster operation is over, it will take time to readjust. Following are some actions that can help you return to normalcy:

- Move into your old routines gradually, and let family members and co-workers carry more weight for a while.
- Spend time enjoying some of your favorite hobbies and pastimes.
- Reconnect with your community and spiritual supports.
- Avoid making big life decisions for a while.
- Be patient. Recovering from emotional distress takes time. Progress may be measured by two steps forward and one step back.
- Be aware that you may have recurring thoughts, dreams or

flashbacks. Over time you can expect them to diminish.

- Recognize that your family may be experiencing the disaster along with you. Support each other. Now is a time for patience, understanding and communication.

For more information about disaster mental health for responders, visit:

DSHS's Critical Incident Stress Management Network:
www.dshs.state.tx.us/comprep/cism/default.shtm

SAMHSA's Managing Stress: Tips for Emergency and Disaster Response Workers
<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/Disasterr relief/pubs/manstress.asp>

SAMHSA's Tips for Managing and Preventing Stress: A Guide for Emergency Response and Public Safety Workers
<http://download.ncadi.samhsa.gov/ken/pdf/KEN01-0098R/KEN01-0098R.pdf>